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ABSTRACT

The speaker briefly covers the history of the "back to basics" movement, some of the practices that have helped create the movement, an alternative view of what is "basic" in education, and some of the oversimplifications and possible adverse consequences that might result from an unbridled back-to-basics movement. (Author/IRT)

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WHAT IS THE "BACK TO BASICS" MOVEMENT?

Elden M. Amundson
Presented at AASA Convention
February 22, 1976

On the surface, this seems like a rather simple and straight forward question for which there should be a correspondingly uncomplicated answer that a person ought to be able to give in a sentence or two and sit down. Having thus answered the question in a few simplistic well-understood terms, there presumably would be nothing further to debate so that the session could be completed and adjourned within a few minutes. However, after having researched the question a bit and considered some of its implications, I find that there is more involved than can be answered as briefly as one might first presume.

By way of establishing some sort of a rationale or point of beginning, it can perhaps be said that the "Back to Basics" movement is a societal reaction to generalizations, excesses, misdirection, misunderstandings and in some instances, ill-advised philosophies and practices that have emerged in our schools during the past quarter century. Some of the causes for this reaction have been of our own making while others have been brought upon us by forces beyond our control, but which nevertheless exercise strong influence upon society as a whole, including the schools.

This audience is well aware of the "Johnny cannot read" charges, criticisms of the new math, and more recently the National Assessment of Educational Progress Test Results revealing that the written communication

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skills of 13 and 17 year old students declined significantly from 1970 to 1974. While we may be inclined to pass these charges off as broad generalizations which have no specific significance, they nevertheless become powerful ammunition for our critics in supporting their contentions that the schools are failing in their mission. Unusual perhaps is the community where groups have not already begun to question the validity of such concepts as the open school, the creativity orientated curriculum, and teaching methodology in some of the classrooms which has, for example, de-emphasized the teaching of correct grammatical construction because of the belief that rules stifle spontaneity. The "Back to Basics" movement is therefore, you see, not only content directed but strongly oriented toward method as well. Those individuals already more or less disenchanted with the quality of the school's product and permissiveness are therefore the people who are providing momentum to the "Back to Basics" phenomenon which we see arising today. To ignore its political implications and potential impact upon our educational system would, in my opinion, be a serious mis-judgment of the movement's possible far-reaching implications.

An increasing number of so-called fundamental schools offered as conservative "Back to Basics" alternatives to the regular schools are already being established and receiving strong popular support of parents. These fundamental schools promise to do what the regular schools in many cases have not been able to do, that is, teach youngsters to read, add, write and perhaps most important, to behave.

Whether these fundamental schools have been or will be able to live up to these promises isn't yet clear. Some claim they have been, but it probably is too soon to tell for sure. However, what is clear and probably

reason enough to warrant continued existence and formation of additional such schools is their political success.

According to the Council for Basic Education, the first of the fundamental alternatives was formed in San Geronimo, CA in the early '70's. Since then, other fundamental schools have been established, usually at the urging of parents or other school board members at Pasadena and Cupertino, CA, Vancouver, British Columbia, Charlotte-Mecklenberg, NC, Jefferson County, CO, Long Beach, NY, Seattle, Cincinnati, Kansas City, MO and Broward and Dade Counties in Florida. Several others are reportedly being planned elsewhere including such traditionally progressive communities as Evanston, IL.

Proponents of the "Back to Basics" schools contend that if school boards and professionals in education are willing to accept the fact that we are an open society, then "there must be adequate provision for appropriate debate on the means and ends of education. The outcome of that debate can only be a choice within the public system." They further wish it to be recognized that their criticizing educational innovations or progressive ideas does not automatically make them enemies of education or extremists. Being vitally concerned with the quality of education their children are receiving, they ask "for the right to be heard and considered" and that they do not ask, as sometimes accused, for a return to the hickory stick and a repressive or rigid system in which there is no enjoyment. They claim to believe there should be joy in learning and that there is a satisfaction in accomplishment. And finally, it is their belief that the basic alternative school is as capable of a warm and loving atmosphere as any of the unstructured classrooms claim to be.

With this brief description of what "Back to the Basics" movement is all about and some of the conditions which have been giving rise to its impetus, I wish at this point to make it clear that it is not my purpose here this afternoon to make apologies for the American educational system. Rather it is my firm belief that the School Boards, administrators, and teachers of the elementary and secondary schools of this country have, on an overall basis, done a magnificent job of educating the boys and girls under the circumstances we have to operate and with the resources available. Furthermore, we should not be bashful or hesitant to tell the American people about our accomplishments as we talk about our history in this Bicentennial year. But times change and we now must begin looking ahead to the next 200 years.

In many of our schools, teaching basic skills has always been of top priority importance. Over the years, our programs have, of course, expanded to meet challenges of new knowledge and community expectations. Meanwhile, however, programs in the basic skills have usually remained a primary focus of the schools. The accomplishment and credibility of our schools is therefore far greater than some of the critics would have the public believe. This is not to say, however, that you or I necessarily endorse what goes on in another school. As school administrators, you and I have the responsibility of meeting the tests of accountability for our respective systems so far as resources are available.

Having therefore stated my position relative to the overall accomplishments of the American school system while also acknowledging some questionable concepts and philosophies being practiced which have given rise to the "Back

to Basics" movement, I should like then to dwell, for a few minutes, on the question of what is basic in education not only today, but presumably will be tomorrow as well. Also, it seems that over-simplification and possible adverse consequences resulting from an unbridled "Back to Basics" movement bear some mention.

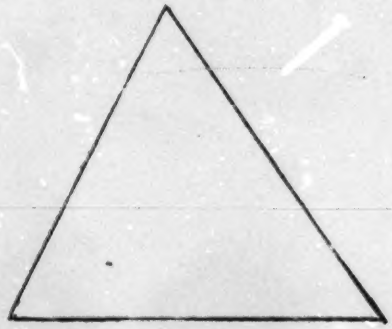
What then is basic in today's education from the standpoint of content? If someone asked this question a few years ago, we probably would have said reading, writing and arithmetic and the answer might have ended there. Today when we ask the question "What is basic?", parents give us a longer and more complex answer. The 3 R's are still at the top of the list, but we also find that parents and students feel some other things are basic as well. Just a few of those basics are, for example, science, social studies, physical education, music, art, drama, a sense of discipline, consumer education, environmental education, an understanding of our democratic way of life, oral communication, a sense of self worth, an understanding of other peoples and the ability to adapt in a changing world.

Basic education today, then, is obviously more than re-adoption of the McGuffey Readers, memorizing the multiplication tables, as worthwhile an exercise as that may happen to be, and putting the chairs in the classroom back into straight rows.

If you will imagine with me for a few moments and visualize before you or upon the wall a triangle, I shall attempt to illustrate, in a general way, what to me are the basics in education.

DISCIPLINE

(1) Developed from an appreciation of traditional values and ethics.
(2) Integrity.
(3) Recognition and exercise of responsibilities as well as rights.
(4) Orderly classroom conducive to constructive learning.
(5) Self-respect.



SKILLS

(1) The 3 R's.
(2) Communication (story)
(3) Job skills.

KNOWLEDGE

(1) The world about us.
    (a) Basic Subjects.
    (b) People and places.
(2) History, heritage, structure and operation of our government.
(3) Ideals and principles that evolved in English Common Law and are proclaimed in the great documents that established the Republic and limited its powers - our Constitution.

This conceptual model oriented toward education in the basics will understandably have somewhat of a different connotation and implication for different students. Implementation of the model must therefore be patterned to the needs and expectations both for and of each student. Whatever the variations, however, there should remain a common denominator of basic learning experiences in areas represented by the 3 sides of the triangle so that the individual might function more successfully in today's complex society whether he/she becomes a butcher, baker or candlestick maker.

From the standpoint of methodology, implementation of this model also has definite implications for both pre-service and in-service training of teachers. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (and perhaps as many of you have observed from your review of credentials) it

is possible for an aspiring teacher of high school English to go all the way through high school, college and advanced education degrees without taking a single course in English composition. Little wonder then that the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests scores on written communication skills have been slipping when the teachers have such limited preparation. Startling revelations as have been discovered by some research studies which show that many college graduates, including those certified as teachers, have reading, spelling and arithmetic skills that at best are around the 8th grade level, naturally raises serious questions about the adequacy of teacher preparation. Having for many years requested teacher applicants to file letters of application rather than merely filling out an application blank, I have personally observed many letters, including those of some English majors, which give credence to this charge that in too many instances the writing skills of college graduates leave a great deal to be desired. Further evidence of a growing concern over better adequacy of teacher preparation in the skill areas is the action of the school board in Stamford, CT in passing a resolution requiring teachers applying for jobs to demonstrate mastery of written and spoken English as a prerequisite to be hired and that currently employed teachers either pass an English test or receive remedial training. So as not to be misunderstood or guilty of over-generalization about this point, I wish to emphasize that a large number of our teachers <u>are well trained</u> in the basic skills we have been talking about - but the growing number who are not so well prepared is becoming an increasing concern.

Not only then is the "Back to Basics" politically popular, but as already

cited, is being implemented in several communities. That more fundamental schools will be established is a near certainty. These facts in themselves should not be disturbing to us, quite to the contrary we should seize upon the opportunity which the "Back to Basics" movement presents to gather public support for higher standards of performance in our schools. However, as momentum begins to build, we as responsible educators will have cause for concern over a possible "over-kill" as the pendulum comes back in the opposite direction. Should that occasion arise, I would hope we will exercise our professional leadership in avoiding such an equally disastrous occurrence. Mark Twain supposedly suggested at one time that a good defense against the new weapon called a submarine would be to bring the oceans to a boil. Hopefully neither the "Back to Basics" or any other movement for that matter, will be brought up to the educational boiling point.

Certain groups within our society may also well seize upon the fundamental school idea as justification to limit the structure of the curriculum and thereby reduce school budgets. Similarly to other products or services in the market place, quality education will not come at bargain prices any more than will quality merchandise. Our position, therefore, must remain firm and clear on this point that while we support fundamentally sound basic education programs, our commitment to concern for the whole child will continue to require not only present level but very probably even higher levels of funding, especially in a period of money inflation such as we have been experiencing.

These, then, are some of the aspects of the "Back to Basics" movement as I see them. Although the AASA as an organization maintains a posture

supportive of educational programs with strong emphasis upon the basics, the thoughts expressed have been my own and therefore do not necessarily represent an official endorsement or position statement on behalf of the association which I currently serve as an officer.

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